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SUBJECT: AU-IBAR HOSTS REGIONAL AVIAN INFLUENZA WORKSHOP

11. Summary: The African Union's Inter-Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR) hosted October 2-4 in Gaborone an Avian Influenza (AI) technical workshop for Southern Africa officials from the Ministries of Agriculture and Health, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Animal Health Organization (OIE), the European Union (EU), and other donors, including USAID. AU-IBAR said it has budgeted USD 22.2 million for regional AI activities, Southern African governments should allocate more of their own resources to combating the disease. Dr. Bonaventure Mtei from the OIE-hosted Regional Animal Health Center (RAHC) highlighted its collaboration with the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and AU-IBAR to address animal health in Southern Africa, and expectations of closer cooperation with the WHO. USAID explained U.S. government (USG) interventions in the region and the WHO and OIE stressed the importance of preparedness and information sharing. Other issues raised included; a) HPAI communication at national and regional levels; b) HPAI outbreak management and control, and emergency response; d) AI surveillance of wild birds in Southern Africa; and g) HPAI diagnostic capacity, networks, procedures and gaps. Closing recommendations included a call to SADC members for continued and enhanced coordination between AU-IBAR's SPINAP initiative and existing programming support; technical assistance; and/or funding from USAID, the World Bank, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).
End Summary

The Workshop

12. The African Union's Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR) hosted October 2-4 at the Big Five Lodge in Gaborone an Avian Influenza (AI) technical workshop for Southern Africa. Attendees included Ministries of Health (MOH) and Agricultural officials and National AI Coordinators from almost every member of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) except South Africa, as well as from the WHO, the OIE, the EU and other cooperation partners, such as USAID's Regional AI Coordinator. The overall aim of this and other AI technical workshops sponsored by AU-IBAR is to improve regional coordination of the implementation of the EU-funded Support Program for Integrated National Action Plans for Avian and Human Influenza (SPINAP-AHI) by bringing the key actors together to share ideas and knowledge, and harmonize their understanding of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) strategies for their effective application at national level. In addition, SPINAP-AHI organized this meeting in close collaboration with the regional economic communities to: a) have the gathering coincide with the signing of some of the funding agreements with AU-IBAR; and b) to give the countries a clear understanding of the best way to utilize the funds provided by the program.

Role and Views of AU-IBAR

13. In his welcoming remarks, AU-IBAR Acting Director Dr. Ahmed El Sawahly thanked Botswana for hosting the event and the attending nations for their commitment to, and efforts on AI pandemic preparedness, and donors for their technical and financial support. In addition to explaining the history and role of AU-IBAR, which was created in 1951 to deal with animal disease threats, El Sawahly said his organization has a major role to play in tackling transboundary zoonotic diseases. He noted that HPAI is now affecting 61 countries and thus remains a serious global threat. He admonished that while AU-IBAR has budgeted USD 22.2 million for regional AI activities,

Southern African governments should allocate more of their own resources to combating the disease. AI could only be controlled by a regional, coordinated approach, he warned, and it would take just one uncooperative country to cause a weak link in the system.

14. El Sawahly then explained the SPINAP funding and application processes. He revealed that nine countries had signed agreements (two in Southern Africa) and 19 accords are pending, six of which are from Southern Africa. SPINAP is in the process of releasing funds to finance emergency preparedness against HPAI in eligible African, and Asian, Caribbean and Pacific (Africa ACP) countries. Funding for countries is based on applications derived from their SPINAP Emergency Preparedness Request (EPR) plans submitted to AU-IBAR. El Sawahly noted that an assessment of received applications, and feedback from inception workshops indicate significant disparities in technical capacities and their formulation of AI interventions. Among the key areas of interest expressed by applicants are cross-border coordination and harmonization of interventions. He added that there were also varying interpretations and applications of available strategies to combat AI, further demonstrating a need to discuss them in order to reach a common understanding on their effective application.

15. In a second AU-IBAR intervention, Dr. Baboucarr Jaw discussed the importance of regional networks for HPAI and other telephone-based disease surveillance (TBDS), as well as information sharing. He stressed that regional networking offered the opportunity to enhance the capacity of national veterinary services and to negotiate capacity thresholds in standards-setting fora. Jaw lamented the lack of clarity in reporting responsibilities, with some countries only reporting to SADC and the OIE, but not the AU-IBAR. He allowed that disease reporting mechanisms are clearly defined, but adherence mechanisms remain weak. He acknowledged the economic consequences due to reported outbreaks, but noted that some countries do regular reporting. He opined that informed planning and decision making are the keys to success. Finally, he urged all countries to make use of the Livestock Information Management Systems (LIMS).

OIE AND SADC

16. Dr. Bonaventure Mtei of OIE, which hosts the Regional Animal Health Center (RAHC) based in Gaborone, a joint center with FAO and AU-IBAR, discussed the coordination of HPAI prevention and control interventions, challenges, and best practices. He highlighted RAHC's collaboration with the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and AU-IBAR to address animal health in Southern Africa, and expectations of closer cooperation with the WHO. Mtei said countries need to assess the capacity of their veterinary services, using OIE criteria, but did note that most of SADC members already comply. In addition, governments should use the opportunity of heightened animal health awareness and no immediate AI outbreaks to eradicate other animal diseases such as Newcastle. In his remarks Mr. Beedee Hulman from the SADC Secretariat thanked members for their cooperation on AI and AU-IBAR for hosting their third workshop in 2008. (Note: The first, for Eastern Africa, took place July 29-31, 2008 in Kampala, Uganda, and the second one, for Western Africa, took place August 19-21 in Bamako, Mali 2008. End Note). He echoed El Sawahly's warning about the continuing threat of AI and noted the importance of vigilance and preparedness. Hulman also described the activities of SADC's Joint Technical Committee, established to enhance AI preparedness. The Committee, which has received funding support from the Belgian government, USAID through FAO, OIE, and others, has already met three times.

The GOB's View

17. The MOA's newly-appointed Director of Veterinary Health Services Dr. Moetapele Letshwenyo also thanked AU-IBAR for its assistance, which he said was very important to Botswana's AI preparedness efforts. He expressed the National AI Coordinators in attendance would gain a better understanding of AI preparedness and the SPINAP program from the 3-day workshop. He concluded by noting that there is no room for complacency and surveillance remains critical. The GTZ representative (Germany) opined that the workshop would hopefully facilitate greater intersectoral integration of AI preparedness, harmonize countries' understanding of the SPINAP

program (which is important given the imminence of project implementation), and improve coordination on surveillance and communication.

USAID's Role

¶18. USAID's Kimberly Crunkleton explained the USG's AI program in Southern Africa, which is largely managed by USAID, in collaboration with the U.S. CDC and Department of Agriculture (USDA). Key partners include the FAO's RAHC, AI.COMM, Stop AI, WHO/AFRO, CDC, the Naval Medical Research Unit (NAMRU), the Global Avian Influenza Network for Surveillance (GAINS), AI Deliverance, the UN Pandemic Influenza Contingency (UN-PIC), and the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI). She said USAID's strategic approach to AI preparedness aims to build on existing platforms using a two-track approach, namely regional and national programs. Key objectives of both programs are to: a) Build on already existing platforms and capabilities; b) Focus on activities that could contribute immediately to the detection and containment of HPAI in animal and human populations (e.g., preparedness planning, surveillance and detection); c) Promote well-coordinated and integrated response covering animal and human infection; d) Enhance and share sub-regional technical capabilities and expertise, with a focus on those areas of most immediate vulnerability. Ms. Crunkleton also highlighted past USAID South Africa assistance focused on regional activities such as: i) staffing/preparedness/coordination (USD 63,000; part-time coordinator and sub-regional coordination workshop); ii) surveillance and detection (USD 132,000; AI specimen testing costs and field surveillance training course); iii) response and containment (in-kind; 100 PPE kits and other outbreak investigation commodities); and iv) communications (USD 23,000; information posters in newspapers for farmers, distribution of AI education kits, facilitating a Voice of America journalist workshop). USAID regional funding for avian influenza programming in the SADC region totals \$3million for 2007-2009.

Other Interventions

¶19. ILRI's Dr. Christine Jost discussed "risk-targeted active surveillance as an essential component of veterinary services in Southern Africa." She praised the usefulness of risk mapping as a tool for targeting HPAI surveillance. She said ILRI wants to increase regional cooperation, and, like the FAO, is focusing on Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The Zambian National Coordinator related his country's experience in undertaking a USAID-funded desk-top exercise and the lessons learned from it. Other interventions included: a) Strategies to improve HPAI communication at national and regional levels; b) HPAI outbreak management and control alternatives in poultry populations; c) From HPAI preparedness to outbreak management: Experience from Ghana; d) HPAI outbreak management and control in Egypt: the lessons learned; e) HPAI emergency response and communication; f) AI Surveillance of wild birds in Southern Africa; and g) HPAI Diagnostic Capacity, Networks, Procedures and Gaps.

Next Steps

¶10. Closing recommendations to the workshop included a call from all SADC member states for continued and enhanced coordination between AU-IBAR's SPINAP initiative and existing programming support, technical assistance and, or funding from, inter alia, USAID, the World Bank, CDC, and the USDA. Participants also recommended that AU-IBAR enhance its linkages with the public health capacities already established within the African Union itself, the WHO, CDC, and others. A final recommendation called for countries to expedite the signing of memoranda of understanding between AU IBAR and SADC countries so that funding could be released as soon as possible to allow project activities can to begin.

Comment

¶11. Given the clear and present danger of other diseases that are ravaging sub-Saharan Africa, the distant threat of an AI outbreak

and possible devastating pandemic has bred paralyzing complacency in many countries. So it is extremely encouraging to see not only the AU and SADC beating the drums of AI pandemic preparedness so loudly, but more importantly, to witness SADC countries slowly begin to heed the warnings and answering the call to action. Progress is slow but encouraging. All SADC countries, except South Africa, are expected to receive one-time funding in the range of USD 200-400,000; and most of these nations should have funds released to them by December 12008. This financial stimulus ought to quicken the pace of AI preparedness activities.

Nolan